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ABSTRACT

Designed for secondary school English teachers who want to help their students develop enthusiasm for words, their histories, and the way language structures words to produce meaning, this paper offers suggestions for a program of study employing dictionary projects and personal experience. The paper describes making a class dictionary of teen language, involving such activities as the following: (1) posting words on a class bulletin board; (2) interviewing students and parents to gather words; (3) examining dictionaries to see what words they contain; (4) examining textbooks for ways to present new terms; (5) examining dictionary histories; (6) deciding how to select words; (7) writing definitions; (8) determining spellings and variant spellings as well as pronunciation and usage; (9) debating decisions of correctness versus majority rule; and (10) accounting for changes in meanings of various words. The paper argues that this broader, deeper type of language study remedies past problems of paying exclusive attention to memorization and mechanical skill, because students begin to understand the nature of the language system they have mastered. The paper suggests additional language lesson plans based on different areas of linguistic studies, including units on generating spelling rules from observations of spelling patterns, proposing a reform of English spelling, illustrating a definition, compiling lists of morphemes, and compiling sequences of words with relative shades meaning. (JG)

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Linguistics in the English Class

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Let me describe a class studying English. I see the students working individually to develop their own dictionaries of words about a subject that interests them such as cars or the sea or animals or sports. The dictionaries they will produce will have all of the elements of a regular dictionary, including illustrations, a gazetteer, and biographical information.

THE CLASS DICTIONARY: TEEN LANGUAGE

At the same time, in order to allow the students to practice together the skills they will need in their individual projects, I see them working together to develop a class dictionary. The focus of this class project might be a number of things, of course; but I see them gathering a dictionary of words most often used by teenagers, including especially their slang.

Practicing as a group on words they use regularly, these students write entries for such every day words as "car," "teacher," "girlfriend," and "television," general slang, such as "rock," "grass," and "disco," as well as their own current slang, whatever that is. They also include special school terms and slang as well as the more general teenage slang and words peculiar to the town, state, and region.

As the project develops, I see them discussing each step of the dictionary building process, including a comparison of individual efforts at defining and spelling. These discussions help them to understand the problems involved in each step of dictionary development before they work on that aspect of their individual projects.

CLASS BULLETIN BOARD

In the classroom, I see a bulletin board devoted to the

words that are added each day to the class dictionary.

INTERVIEWING

And I see students interviewing other students, parents, and other members of the community and studying newspapers and magazines in order to gather words for the class dictionary.

EXAMINING DICTIONARIES

In order to get some idea of what their dictionaries should contain, the students take a close look at several modern dictionaries to see what they do and what they do not do. They will find that dictionaries differ. They also examine the many specialized dictionaries that already exist, such as those of railroad and musical terms.

EXAMINING TEXTBOOKS

And they look at their textbooks from other courses to see how those books present new terms. Since most of their textbooks have glossaries, the students will come to see that, in many ways, textbooks are really specialized dictionaries.

DICTIONARY HISTORIES

Finally, I see the teacher discussing briefly the history of dictionaries and examining how dictionaries have changed from the early books of unusual words through Johnson's effort, working alone, to gather all of the words of the langauge and illustrate how they should be used to the modern corporate effort and its various ways of dealing with usage questions.

SELECTING WORDS

Selecting words for inclusion is the first big problem the students have to deal with. They discover that establishing about which words to list and which to leave out isn't easy. But

from discussions of this problem comes a realization that dictionaries are not absolute but rather the creations of human beings.

DEFINITIONS

Defining words is a process that is far more difficult than most of these students realized before they started to make a dictionary. Samuel Johnson, in fact, is known to have made at least one mistake (the word "fetlock") and to have included a few personalized definitions ("oats" and "lexicographer"). These students will gain insights into the process of defining and into the use of the dictionary by creating their own definitions. They are tempted to write personal or humorous definitions of many of these terms. One student proposes the following definition for car: "what my father won't let me drive on Saturday nights." That Dr. Johnson indulged himself in this regard seems to many of them adequate justification for such humor. The class struggles to decide whether or not to include such definitions.

SPELLINGS

In their own personal dictionaries and in the class dictionary, the students find that they have to do more than select and define. They have to determine the spelling or spellings of the words that are generally in use, consider and find a way of writing down the ways in which the words are pronounced, decide on the forms of the words, and make all of the other decisions that the lexicographer must make. A bit of grammar is also necessary. The students have to consider the various grammatical uses of the word and try to determine whether

or not it is ever used as a verb, for example, or used only as a noun.

CORRECTNESS

The question of correctness is one that they have to face at each stage of the building of their dictionaries. The class project allows for a vote on disputed spellings, meanings, etc.; but the class has to decide whether or not majority rule makes sense in relation to words, a concept that has profound implications for their attitude toward and understanding of language in general. They find the issue of correctness versus majority rule hard to deal with, but they argue it through to a decision. They have to make a decision about what correctness means in relation to words.

Next, they have to decide whether or not they are going to include all meanings, spellings, and grammatical uses that they encounter without making judgements about them, include them but condemn certain ones, or exclude the ones that they determine are incorrect. And they have to decide how to recognize incorrectness.

CHANGE IN MEANINGS AND SPELLINGS

Words, of course, change their meanings over time. Teachers usually use examples from Old and Middle English to illustrate such changes. But many of the words the students want to include in both their own dictionaries and the class project have changed their meanings or, at least, acquired new meanings in recent times. And so they illustrate the concept of language change just as well as Anglo-Saxon words. In fact, the students discover that many of the words they agree to include in the

class dictionary of teenage speech have changed their meanings since the students' parents were young. So, I see them using their parents as a resource to detect changes in the meanings of words such as "grass," "rock," and "disk."

The Modern Language Program,

The Modern Language Teacher

That's my vision. What does it mean? Well, we teach English. Pat has told us that teaching English means helping students develop their ability to use the written form of our language for self-discovery and for communication. And I agree. Leila has told us that teaching English means providing students the opportunity to respond to literature written in the English language and to share those responses with others. I couldn't agree more.

ENGLISH IS A LANGUAGE

But English is, after all, a language. For me, teaching English also means helping students to explore the language that they use every day, at home and in school, on the football field, on a date, listening to television, praying, writing, speaking, reading, and listening.

STUDENT EXPERTISE

And when I see the ideal English program that helps students understand the language system that they have mastered and use so effectively in every aspect of their lives, I see a way to make them truly students -- that is, scholars -- because they can bring to their work in school expertise, understanding, knowledge.

THE NEW LANGUAGE PROGRAM

In the last dozen years or so, informed English teachers have begun to add dialect units and the actual making of dictionaries to the curriculum. Therefore, the shallowness, incompleteness, and lack of interest that resulted from a too exclusive attention to memorization and mechanical skill has in some programs been remedied in recent years by this broader and deeper type of language study.

The modern study of a language involves a look at all of its aspects, its sounds, its words, its symbols. And that is a worthwhile focus of attention for our students. A fully developed language is what makes humankind unique, not our thumb or our invention of the wheel; and our students need to know more about their language, esteem it more highly, find it more interesting, see its potential for play as more appealing, sense the joy of it far more than they do.

Areas of Linguistic Studies for the English Class

Linguists usually divide the study of language into eight dimensions or specialities. Despite the complexity of each, they are all suitable for study by students in any grade level to some degree of depth. Each one should be included in the school language program at several levels in increasing degrees of depth and complexity.

Principles for Designing Language Lessons

English teachers must be able to design language lessons and units that are based both on what language is and on what students are. A well designed language unit must incorporate what we know about education and students in general but go beyond that to embrace fully the nature of language and language learning. Several principles suggest themselves.

If we can accept that set of principles, then we can begin to build into the curriculum an effective program of study of the English language, although we may not feel as comfortable with the scholarly content of the language part of our subject as we do with that of the literature part. But, a bit shaky in our knowledge of linguistics, we can set off on a journey of exploration with our students. The materials are there, although perhaps not as plentifully as we might wish. Devices in many media now provide us with the support we need to undertake with our students that exploration of our language. Books, filmstrips, transparencies, and films, as well as programs for micro-computers, exist in the catalogues of many publishers. The results of linguistic studies are now available in a host of books and articles, there to guide us in deciding what to teach and how to teach it. Finally, interesting and effective activities have been invented in every area of linguistic studies.

There is, surely, no excuse for the dull lessons about syntax or the dictionary, the alphabet or language variety. There is no excuse for a return to the incomplete and shallow language program of the past. The modern language program has the potential to help students understand themselves, how they think, how they communicate, how they relate ideas to other ideas, how they judge other people and their thoughts and beliefs. It can be the most profound part of the curriculum if it is not surrendered to the dull and shallow routine of its past. As English teachers, we must insist that our students understand and appreciate the full richness of their language,

not merely drill mindlessly on its conventions.

Let me give you a few examples.

Meanings

For most students, words have definite meanings. Yet few have thought much about how words attain and convey meanings. Although they realize that some words have more than one meaning, few have considered variety of meanings; that is, how we know which one is required in a sentence. Few will be aware of the existence of connotations.

Consequently, a unit in meanings of words can serve to deepen the students' understanding of the nature of words. The unit might start with a look at a list of words they will recognize. How do we know they are words? What do some of them mean? A companion list of made-up words -- "drinkle," "Prampf," etc. -- can be used to consider the subject of word and meaning again. Then they might look at a word like "the" or "by" and try defining it. They will find that writing definitions for such structure words is no easy task.

In the original list of words, there should be some that have many meanings: "spring," "paper," "run" are good examples. Students might be asked to consider why a word would have so many meanings. Depending on student interest, the teacher might explain a bit about the history of words, the borrowing of words from other languages, the dynamic nature of the English language. A more detailed unit on this subject -- again tied to the dictionary -- should also be a part of the students' language program, however.

One distinction that they will have to understand is that

between denotations -- which can more or less be understood as the dictionary meaning -- and connotations -- which might be thought of as the emotions and images that many people have and see when they hear or read the word. An examination of specific words that are likely to carry connotations -- "dentist," "candy," "storm," "car" -- should help to establish this vital distinction.

After they have considered what such words suggest to them, they should look them up in a variety of standard dictionaries, comparing the meanings they find to each other and to the associated meanings they have given the words. Also important for the students to realize is that words may have personal or private connotations because of associations that only one individual is likely to give to the word.

At this point they are ready to carry out a project to gather the meanings of some words. First each student should choose some words to define. The words should each have a number of definitions -- but not too many -- and at least some connotations as well. The teacher will want to help with this selection. Then each student will need to become familiar with the definitions that appear in a number of dictionaries and to consider possible connotations for each of his or her words. Thus equipped, the students can fan out into the school, gathering meanings from students and teachers. After a few days of research, the results can be used to review the concepts of "word," "meaning," "denotation," and "connotation."

The Spelling System

Spelling is a sore subject with many students who are rather

shaky in their sense of patterns of spelling and not possessed of very good visual memories. In most cases, students probably believe that spellings are arbitrary and without reason. They also believe that the dictionary spellings are the true and only way to spell words. Neither belief is, of course, correct.

A unit on spelling should contain two main sections. First, students should examine a large number of words, looking for what usually seems to be the way sounds are spelled. They should try to come up with some descriptions -- they might be called rules -- of these standard spellings. The consonants are relatively easy (although, for example, the sound /sh/ has at least 14 different spellings, including those in "shoe," "sugar," and "issue." The vowel sounds are much harder. They should also discover the concept that position in the word --beginning, middle or end, at least -- is often the factor deciding whether or not a particular spelling is frequently or ever used.

Although their sample will be too small for them to do more than speculate, they should also try to discover which of several possible spellings is most often used, which next most often, which very rarely. They should discuss their feelings about what they are finding and come to the realization that selecting a spelling for a word not already known to them is not a matter of random guessing but more one of playing the odds.

As they look for patterns in spelling, they will have to decide how the words they are examining should be spelled. In the second phase of the unit, they should go to dictionaries; and they will discover variant spellings (see Variant Spellings in Modern American Dictionaries by Donald Emery, NCTE, 1973),

alternatives given by one dictionary and disagreements among dictionaries. They should discuss how this variation could be and what it means for the dictionary as a source of spellings.

The students should begin a list of variant spellings of words that they frequently misspell. They can see this list as a way to justify their spellings when those spellings are challenged.

Reforming English Spelling

Students usually feel that the spellings of many English words make no sense. Consequently, the students might undertake a project to reform English spelling. Some of the history of previous efforts -- Johnson, Webster, Shaw -- might be interesting to them; but such a review is not essential to the project. However, they might examine a reprint of Noah Webster's first dictionaries to see how he re-spelled many English words.

Using their set of most frequent spellings, they should try to decide how much variation they will permit and under what circumstances and then begin reworking the body of words they used as a source for their rules. They will need to be alert to potential problems caused by changing spellings. They should try to draw some conclusions about such reform in terms of usefulness and practicality.

Essay on a Word

Many words have a very large number of meanings, especially the simple words that bind our language together. Students have sometimes been asked to find words in dictionaries that have the most meanings. However, merely finding a long list probably does not really make the point that words may have many meanings and

shades of meaning. Rather, they need to think about what those many meanings are and how those meanings came into existence. Therefore, students can be given the really clever short essay from the English Journal titled "On With Up" by Marion Gleason (November 1966, pp. 1087-1088) as a model and select a word with many meanings -- "fast," "run," "to" -- the meanings of which can be put together into a catchy essay on a word.

Classical Figures and Allusions

Webster's Third left out the names of people and mythological figures, and this decision was controversial. Students might look over the literature in the textbooks and elsewhere and collect a list of mythological and other such references. Then they could look them up in a number of dictionaries to see what they find. If dictionaries left them out, they might ask themselves where readers could go to find out the meanings of the references.

A Picture Is Worth a Thousand Words

Many words in dictionaries are illustrated by pictures. Many more could be if space allowed. Students each choose a word the definition of which could be helped by an illustration and draw that illustration. Then they can try to write a definiton of the same word. Next, they can check several dictionaries for their definitions. Finally, each student can present his/her definition, picture, and set of dictionary definitions and ask the class to consider which conveys the meaning of the word most successfully.

New Languages

An especially good way to discover how languages work is to

invent a new language. Obviously, as a part of any such unit, the student should prepare a dictionary of that language, using the full requirements of a dictionary, spelling, parts of speech, etc.

Prefixes, Suffixes, and Roots

Although the making of words from prefixes, suffixes, and roots is often taught as a dry subject, the process of deciding how to include such words and parts of words in a dictionary is more a matter of user needs than linguistics. Thus, students can consider how to deal with such made words. Should "unconventional" be listed by itself, or should the users of the dictionary be expected to look up "un-" and then reason that its meaning can be added to "conventional" to create a new meaning? Or should "covention" be listed, and the user expected to add "-al" to the root? Or should "convene" be listed, and the reader asked to add "-tion" also? And, of course, even "convene" is made up of "con-" meaning "together" and "vene," which is not a word in English but a modification of the Latin word for "come." Since "vene" is not an English word by itself, it is not appropriate to suggest breaking the word "unconventional" down that far for a dictionary listing. All of the other listings by parts are at least possible. Students can try out such words on other students to answer such questions. They will discover that the answers are neither clear nor consistent.

Morphemes

Morphemes are the smallest groups of letters that carry meaning. Not words necessarily, they consist of such elements as "-s" or "-es" meaning plural or "re-" meaning "again." A class

might be asked to review a body of words to try to make a list of the morphemes that they find. This analysis is analogous to looking for atoms and should appeal to scientifically minded students. Reduction to essential meaning is the key. Then the students should look up each morpheme to see what the dictionary says about it. Persistent students might search dictionaries for other morphemes.

People Words

Many words have resulted from the names of people. "Sideburns" from General Ambrose Burnside, "boycott" from the unfortunate Cpt. Charles Boycott, "Ferris Wheel" for its inventor George Washington Ferris, and "diesel" for its inventor Rudolph Diesel. The list is endless, and students enjoy discovering such sources.

In addition, students can consider what words the names of teachers, fellow students, and local figures might give birth to For example, a teacher named Jones, famous for his heavily laden lunch trays, might lend his name to the word "Jonesism," defined as "The act of loading up one's tray so that nothing is left for those waiting in line."

Relative Meanings

Many words mean very much the same thing; but, because of subtle differences in denotation or because of commonly understood connotations, their meanings are really very different. Bertrand Russell illustrated this fact by a famous "conjugation" that starts

> I am sparkling. You are unusually talkative. He is drunk.

I am beautiful. You have good features. She isn't bad looking if you like that type.

I day dream. You are an escapist. He ought to see a psychiatrist.

Once students get the idea -- plump, fat, obese -- they can create such sequences from good connotation to bad.

Well, there are some examples of why I believe that the English language is a fascinating study and one that can draw on what students already know. You may not feel, as I do, that it can serve as the focus of the program; but I hope linguitics will become at least a bit more important in your classes and students will get over their boredom with it and develop some enthusiasm for our words and their histories and the way our language structures those words to produce meaning.